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ABSTRACT

To minimize inconsistencies in hyphenation practices, written English should accurately transcribe spoken English by indicating every open- or plus-juncture with a hyphen ("Plus-juncture" is the special transition the speaker makes between two compound nouns.). Even young native speakers of English can readily perceive semantic and phonological differences between nouns used together as a phrase and those used as a compound ("Sound system" is pronounced with a plus-juncture when used as a compound to mean "a system of sounds," but pronounced without plus-juncture when used as a phrase to mean "a system that is sound."). Thus, a consistent phonological hyphenation would separate nouns used as a compound with a hyphen at every plus-juncture. This system would include hyphenating every noun-noun compound at the plus-juncture between uneven stresses (e.g., speech-community, non-identical), all nonce-compounds (e.g., interchangeability-factor), all longer sequences of nouns at every plus-juncture (e.g., shoe-store-window-sign), and coordinate members of compounds in the spaces separating them (e.g., grammar- and usage-manuals). (JB)

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To Hyphenate or Not To Hyphenate

Robert A. Hall, Jr.

A subject of endless debate is the question posed in the title of this article. Here are the views of an eminent linguist, Professor of Linguistics at Cornell University and author of many books on language.

In English pronunciation, a sequence of two words such as *sound* and *system* can be treated in one of two ways. Either each member of the combination can retain the full stress which it has when it is used independently: *sóund sýstem;* or the second element can have its full stress reduced to intermediate: *sóund sỳstem.* In this latter case, there is always a special type of transition from the first word to the second, known in technical linguistic terminology as *open juncture* or *plus-juncture.*[1] In the particular instance of *sóund sỳstem,* the plus-juncture consists of a special type of release on the final *-d* of *sound;* in other combinations, other phonetic features constitute plus-juncture. The first type of combination is, by virtue of its having two full stresses (*sóund sýstem*), a phrase; the second, inasmuch as it has uneven stresses (full + intermediate, as in *sóund sỳstem,* or intermediate + full, as in *fòrthcóming*) and plus-juncture, is a compound. Every normal native speaker of English reacts differentially (although not necessarily analytically or even with full awareness) to the phonological difference between a phrase and a compound. We all know, without having to be told explicitly, that the phrase *sóund sýstem* means "a system which is sound," whereas the compound *sóund sỳstem* refers to "a system of sounds."

In writing, a hyphen is often used to mark plus-juncture between the two parts of a compound: *sound-system, forthcoming.* One might expect the graphic indication of so simple and obvious a phonological phenomenon as this to be self-evident and hence consistent and universal. On the contrary, the use of the hyphen in compounds has come to be one of the thorniest problems of English punctuation. It is customary to distinguish, on the basis of the use of the hyphen or of space, between compounds which are "closed" (*folklore*), "open" (*stress pattern*), and "hyphened" or "hyphenated" (*match-box*). Aside from a fair amount of common practice in closing up certain compounds (e.g. *typewriter, folklore*), there is no consistency in actual usage nor yet in the prescriptions of dictionaries and style-manuals, either within the corpus of material contained in any one reference-work or between two and more "authorities." Thus, in the third edition of Webster's *New International Dictionary,* on three pages selected at random we find the compounds treated as follows:

Page	Open	Hyphenated	Closed
837	8	3	—
1309	29	5	13
1876	59	3	22

Closing and hyphenation seem to be carried out without rhyme or reason: there is no particular justification, for instance, for hyphenating *light-heeled* and *light-minded* while closing up *lighthearted,* or

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for hyphenating *light-time*, closing up *lightship*, and leaving *light stand* open, when in each of these sets the stress- and juncture-pattern, the morphological structure, and the semantic relationship of the compound words are exactly the same.

Confusion Defended

Strangely enough, this state of confusion is not only generally accepted, but actively defended. For instance, in Funk and Wagnalls' *New Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, we find the flat statement "It is simply impossible to eliminate inconsistencies of form from the English language [i.e., from its spelling and punctuation—RAHjr] even if it could be proved desirable to do so" (p. xxviii, à propos of compounds). Even George Summey, Jr., the most linguistically sophisticated of the writers on punctuation, defends this arbitrariness in in the name of tradition:[2]

> For example, a theory that all specific noun-noun compound nouns made up of short members and marked by defining stress [i.e., / ′ + ‵ / —RAHjr] must be closed up in German fashion has no chance of being accepted by printers or by the public. For one thing, it is an accepted general principle that solid or hyphened compounds should be made only when the one-word form is required for clearness. And although patterns have much to do with forms, there are different forms for certain patterns. Nothing short of an American academy with powers equal to those of the French Academy could reduce the forms of compounds to law and order.

Virtually all theorists of punctuation, even including Summey,[3] have based their discussions on the assumption that punctuation is primarily a visual system and therefore can and should be largely independent of speech. That such an assumption is contrary to the facts of language, has been amply demonstrated in the last century and more.[4] Writing (including punctuation) is, despite its great importance in our modern civilization, basically secondary to language and derivative from it, not co-ordinate with it or independent from it. The basic function of a writing-system is to represent facts of speech, and its performance is to be evaluated only in terms of the extent to which it represents speech fully and accurately.

In the instance of English compounds, the phonological facts, as set forth in our first paragraph, are quite clear and simple. If the phonological conditions outlined there are not met, a form cannot be considered a compound, no matter what its written appearance may suggest; thus, *confidence man* (even if spelled without a hyphen) is a compound, since it is pronounced with full stress on the first word and intermediate stress on the second, and has a plus-juncture between the two; whereas *postman* is not, because its last element is wholly unstressed (and is therefore not an independent word, but a suffix), and there is no open juncture between its parts. The conditions just outlined for considering a form a compound are, it must be noted, wholly phonological; its grammatical function is quite irrelevant.

Proposal Is Simple

My proposal with regard to the hy-

phenation of compounds in spelling is quite simple: that we cut the Gordian knot of "open," "closed," and "hyphened" compounds by using a hyphen in writing every compound which contains a plus-juncture between uneven stresses, no matter of what elements the compound is made up, in what function it is used, or how long its elements are. We will thus uniformly hyphenate all compounds having the pattern / ' + ` /, e.g., *cross-reference, folk-lore, tea-pot, copy-editor, dead-line, speech-community;* and all those having / ` + ' /, such as *hocus-pocus, semi-official, non-identical, pro-complement, apico-palatal, over-correction,* or *Franco-Prussian.* Speakers of English, like those of the other Germanic languages, frequently make nonce-compounds, which are masked in our current spelling habits by being written "open"; these also should be written consistently with hyphens, such as the following which I am making up on the spur of the moment: *identity-marker, interchange-ability-factor, sequence-interruption.* Longer sequences, likewise, should be hyphenated at every plus-juncture, even if they are nonce-compounds: *elevator-operator-union-meetings, shoe-store-window-sign.* The hyphen should also be used before or after spaces separating co-ordinate members of compounds: *grammar- and usage-manuals; train-schedules and -tickets.*

The procedure suggested here, of using the hyphen to mark plus-juncture in compounds everywhere it occurs (which we might term *phonological hyphenation*) has several major advantages. It removes the inconsistency of our present practices; it reflects the actual facts of the language rather than the arbitrary decisions of dictionary- and style-manual-writers; and it is therefore easily taught and remembered. The presence or absence of plus-juncture and secondary stress is clear to all native speakers of English. Every normal native speaker of the language, from the age of six onward, can hear the difference between *a sóund sýstem* and *a sóund-sỳstem,* and similarly for many other minimal pairs like *a Spánish stúdent* "a student who is Spanish" vs. *a Spánish-stùdent* "a student of Spanish." All that any-one, from the first grade onwards, needs in order to apply this principle is to listen to his or her own speech and insert hyphens where they belong.

Objections Are Likely

Of course objections will be raised against this proposal for phonologically based hyphenation. We will be told that English spelling and punctuation are "inherently" irrational, and that nothing can or should be done about the matter. Yet there is no need for us to put up with more than is absolutely necessary in the way of inconsistency; and if the users of a system of orthography or punctuation wish to change it, there is no official or unofficial "authority" which has the right to say them nay. It has been argued that "irresistible" trends are carrying English punctuation in the opposite direction from that advocated here;[5] yet no "trend" in linguistic matters is "irresistible" or "irreversible" if the users of the language or writing-system in question decide to resist or reverse it. Old-line teachers may object, "Good heavens! We ourselves find it almost impossible to understand these new-fangled notions of full and intermediate stress, plus-juncture, and other such horrible things. How can you expect youngsters in the third or fourth grade to understand such abstruse matters?" This is another of the instances in

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which both old and young respond, in their actual behavior, to differences in signals such as those discussed in the previous paragraph; but the young have not yet had the ability to recognize and discuss these differences beaten out of them by that inadequate method of analyzing language which constitutes our traditional grammar. Hence, we may expect the young learners in the elementary grades or even in high-school to catch onto and apply such a principle as phonological hyphenation far quicker and more easily than those of their elders who are too "sot in their ways" to understand it.

There are certain underlying reasons for the existence and continuation of confusion in this and other aspects of English orthography and punctuation.[6] Many people, such as business executives and their secretaries, are repeatedly called on to make decisions concerning such matters, although they do not have sufficient first-hand knowledge to enable them to do so accurately or effectively. Such persons therefore seek the support of an absolute authority, in which they can put their trust and to which they can abdicate their freedom of judgment. When such an attitude of self-abdication becomes sufficiently wide-spread, it is institutionalized in a *libido serviendi*, a "lust for being slaves," which is handed down from one generation to the next as part of the intellectual attitudes taught in our schools and given prestige in our culture.[7] Naturally, the more inconsistent and difficult of acquisition are the principles inculcated by the absolute "authorities," the greater is the effort that must be put forth to learn them, and the greater is the demand for guidance in the process of learning. Hence there arise many vested interests: those of the authors and publishers of reference-works such as dictionaries and style-manuals; those of the employees of publishing- and printing-houses, such as copy-editors and proof-readers; and those of teachers (especially in secretarial schools, business English courses, and the like) and examiners. All of these would have the market for their wares substantially reduced if their subject-matter were simplified and made dependent on criteria accessible to every normal native speaker of English rather than understandable only through "authoritative" interpretations of arcane lore enshrined in sources difficult of access and understanding.

Change Is Possible

Is it, then, quixotic to undertake a campaign for punctuation (including hyphenation) based on the facts of the language rather than on the dicta of some "authority" or other? I do not think so, despite the inertia and the vested interests that dominate the language-teaching-scene at present. Of course we cannot expect a change to come about overnight. We can, nevertheless, continue to campaign for the analysis and teaching of English (grammar, spelling, punctuation) to be placed on a sound linguistic basis. We can aim, in this particular matter, at having phonologically based hyphenation admitted on at least an equal footing with the arbitrary prescriptions of dictionaries or style-manuals; and we can refuse to sign contracts with publishers unless they allow us the last word in these as well as in other matters of spelling and punctuation. No trend is "irreversible," if enough persons with a knowledge of the actual facts and a determination to see that they are known make up their minds to reverse it.

[1]G.L. Trager and H.L. Smith, Jr., An Outline of English Structure (Norman, Oklahoma: Battenburg Press, 1951 [later Washington, D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1957]), pp. 37-9.

[2]American Punctuation (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), p.129.

[3]Cf. the titles of such sections of his American Punctuation as "Written vs. oral punctuation" (pp. 5-6) and "Punctuation a visual system" (pp. 6-7).

[4]Cf. most recently my Introductory Linguistics (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1964), especially Part III ("Writing and Language," Chapters 44-45); also my Sound and Spelling in English (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1961); C.C. Fries, The Structure of English (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), pp. 281-287, and his Linguistics and Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

[5]This is Summey's basis for meting out praise to Edward N. Teall for having "recognized open compounds and correctly predicted increasing use of them" and blame to Alice Morton Ball for having recommended hyphenation in such forms as training-school, coloring-matter, walking-stick, cut-off, break-down (American Punctuation, p. 130, fn.).

[6]Cf. the more extensive discussion in my Introductory Linguistics, Chapter 62.

[7]Cf. Thorstein Veblen's illuminating discussion in the last chapter of his Theory of the Leisure Class (New York, 1898 and later reprints), and my "Thorstein Veblen and Linguistic Theory," American Speech 35(1960) 124-130.